

October 20, 2024
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 Mark 10:35-45

Being a Servant

I was at a vocational crossroads.
 I had graduated from divinity school and then spent two years doing arts event coordination,
 Which was important and challenging and even fun work,
 But I knew that it wasn't living out the depths of what God was calling me to do.
 I knew, deep down, that I was being called to ministry -
 I couldn't have articulated ordained ministry yet -
 But I knew that looking for jobs outside of ministry was avoiding the real thing.
 Even though I had left the Catholic church by this point,
 And was a functioning Episcopalian,
 I ended up applying for a job as a campus minister at a catholic college,
 Internally Kicking and screaming through the whole process.
 From the outside, it was a funny fit,
 And even from the inside, to be frank...
 But I learned in that season
 that the spirit is wily indeed.

One of the biggest things I was anxious about
 In working at a Catholic college's campus ministry
 Was having a Catholic priest as my boss.
 In my previous life as a Roman Catholic,
 I had known some wonderful priests, to be sure,
 And I'd also known some pretty terrible ones,
 Men who were damaged and bitter,
 Men who used every bit of the power and separateness
 Their station in the institutional church afforded them.
 I knew where I ranked, officially,
 As a lay woman in this kind of environment.
 And I knew there was a powerful pull to being in this place at this time doing this job...
 But I wasn't sure how even the Holy Spirit was going to protect me from a bad boss,
 Especially a bad priest boss.
 Then I met Fr. Ray.

When I started working there, Fr. Ray had been at Merrimack for just over a decade,
 But he had been an Augustinian priest and friar since his young adult years.
 Now in his 60s,
 He had the deep wisdom and insight of someone who had seen the whole system
 All of its best and worst corners,
 And had decided to stay and remain part of it.

He was (and is!) an introvert, quiet and unassuming,
But enormously welcoming and cheerful.

When a student's friend from childhood died,
He was there.
When various staff members had personal or family challenges,
He offered a listening ear.
and absorbed what he could from their own job description into his.
When our campus was mired deep in COVID anxiety
and depression over necessary but isolating pandemic protocols,
He was steady and present.
Against the rules of the denomination,
He asked me to start preaching at the student mass -
The first person ever to ask me to do so.
He cared for the other Augustinians in his community
And some particularly challenging administrators
With humor and lightness.

Over the 4.5 years we worked together,
I witnessed him continually put the well-being of others and of the whole community
Over striving, over convenience, over his own security,
And certainly over anything like glory.
Even though our department had an administrative assistant,
He *always* made his own copies.

Fr. Ray deepened and elevated my idea
of what priesthood,
And what christian discipleship
In its essence,
Could be.
And when I imagine the one who wishes to become great
Becoming a servant,
His life is one of the clearest I've seen.

Jesus and the disciples are almost at Jerusalem.
He's given them new teachings about old problems.
He's told them about the first being last and the last being first.
He's told them about the fate of the Messiah, and predicted his passion.
They are still not grasping it -
Either because they *do not* understand or they *will not* understand.

"You do not know what you are asking"
Jesus assures James and John,
In response to their question.
We wonder, in our own stumbling and half-hearted attempts-

to what extent would it have been impossible to know
 before the journey through the cross?
 How do *we* know what it is we're asking?
 What lies ahead on the road of faith?

And yet, even if we give James and John the benefit of the doubt...
 Their boldness, their competitiveness,
 their grasping for security and glory in the world's terms
 Is cringe-worthy.
 So cringe-worthy, in fact,
 That Mark's is the only gospel to recount the story in this way.
 In Matthew's later version,
 James and John's request is put in the mouth of their mother
 To soften the ask.
 In Luke's later version,
 It's rounded out even more to remove any names:
 "A dispute also arose among them
 as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest."
 It seems that, even in the first few generations of believers,
 Christian communities understood the audacity
 and the irony
 of their childish and short-sighted ask.
 Ironic,
 Because at the cross -
 Which Jesus has to move through in order to arrive at his glory -
 The people at his left and right will not be followers or friends,
 But thieves,
 One of which will openly mock him.

To be a servant
 was to have one's identity completely tied to another person or family.
 One commentator I read argued
 that the roles of servant and slave
 shared the connotation of
 "immediate service on a superior's behalf."
 Jesus' idea of servanthood here, then,
 indicates that this behavior is a sign of one belonging to God,
 of true discipleship.

I'm finding poignant significance this morning
 That even within this specific story and interaction -
 Jesus is modeling what he wants us to do.
 Jesus is being the example.
 In response to this demand,
 Jesus replies, "What is it you want me to do for you?"

And after they speak their absurd question,
 He doesn't say "absolutely not"
 Or "how dare you ask me, the all-important Messiah, this!"
 He doesn't lord his authority over the disciples.
 He doesn't answer a request for position and glory
 By asserting his own position and glory...
 He tells them that they don't know what they are asking.
 When the rest of the disciples get angry at this jostling for power,
 He does not insist on his own.
 Instead, he gathers. He teaches. He offers them an alternative.

Jesus is always modeling for us how he's asking us to be.
 Jesus is the example
 Standing in opposition to
 This competitive, ambitious model of life along the way
 Of life in discipleship.

I hope that we all have our own Fr. Rays,
 Our own models of servant love and servant leadership
 That point us in the right direction.
 But even the most loved leaders in our communities
 And the most faithful disciples
 Will have times when they fail to live in this posture of loving service,
 Seeking glory or recognition or self-interest
 Over service to the whole,
 Over humble love.
 Instead of letting even the best leaders' imperfections
 cause us to be cynical or to despair,
 I can recognize that *anyone* would collapse
 under the weight of those expectations.
 Instead, I need to constantly reframe my vision,
 making sure our god is at the center of it.
 It's God, and only god,
 who can hold all of that weight of our fears and dreams,
 our deepest failings and everyday imperfections.

How do *you* hear it today?
 As someone determining a new direction or call on your life?
 As someone having achieved a high professional position in your field,
 confronted by how you should wield your new influence?
 As a recently retired person,
 wondering how to be in daily life absent the hierarchy of a workplace?
 A student, navigating expectations of behavior and achievement
 vs. the quiet nudging of your heart?

I hear this gospel as someone just weeks away from being ordained a priest...
 When I will be fully confronted by the realities and tensions
 Of this spirit of servant leadership.

Jesus insists on a posture.
 A posture of readiness, of receptivity, of welcome, of willingness.
 Of seeing the whole and seeing one's place within it.
 Of weaving our lives in with others',
 not separate,
 not over and above,
 but wholly *with* others.

Who is your example of this posture?
 Of servanthood in love?
 Jesus' words are challenging,
 Hard to embrace on the surface.
 But I think that maybe the point is -
 Instead of accepting commands -
 We are meant to follow examples.
 The example Jesus set with his life,
 And the example of the steadily faithful people we've known in our own lives.
 And maybe in following the examples,
 We will be transformed by the posture itself.

I read a beautiful essay last night entitled, "Control is Overrated"
 The author, Davis Johnson, wrote:

"The good life is not about bringing more of the world within your grasp. Instead, it's about being grasped by the one who gave himself for us. It's about finding rest in the *uncontrollable* grace of God and being freed from the exhausting pursuit of control. In a world that demands more of our time, attention, and energy, the good life is Christ and him crucified."

Living the way that Jesus urges us to live-
 In service to love-
 has the possibility of setting us free from the logic of the world,
 and ushering us into the *freedom* of life
 in the kingdom of God.